



## A MINDFUL PATHWAY TO FLOURISHING: MEDIATING EFFECTS OF SELF-COMPASSION AND VALUED LIVING IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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### Abstract:

The aim of this study was to test a mindfulness model for flourishing along with mediating roles of self-compassion and valued living. Participants of the study were 327 undergraduate students (236 female, 91 male) with the mean age of 20.3 (SD=1.4). The results of path analysis yielded that mindfulness has positively direct relations with self-compassion and valued living. As well, the direct effects of self-compassion and valued living on flourishing were found positively significant. Both of the indirect paths from mindfulness to flourishing through self-compassion and valued living were also emerged statistically significant. The proposed model of mindfulness came by accounting for 37% of the variance of flourishing in the current study.

**Keywords:** flourishing, mindfulness, self-compassion, valued living

### 1. Introduction

In well-being literature, there is generally a bidirectional perspective to explain psychological functioning through two different standings (Deci and Ryan, 2006). One of those approaches is hedonism that explains well-being through happiness, life satisfaction and positive affect and the term is used as 'subjective well-being'. In this approach, well-being is defined as the indicator of life quality in terms of the relationship between environmental features and a person's life satisfaction (Campbell, Converse and Rodgers, 1976; as cited in Wells, 2010). The other approach namely eudaimonic approach as generated by humanistic authors links well-being to the development of human potential and the term is used as 'psychological well-being'. The idea behind this approach is that people have needs at different levels and they have the motivation to full-fill their potential that is at the top of their needs. However, for one to reach to the upper needs, lower ones should be met first (Wells, 2010).

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Both hedonic and eudaimonic approaches highlights essential ingredients of well-being through different pathways. The efforts to intersect these two separate conceptualizations led to the emergence and rise of the “flourishing” movement that is a new understanding of well-being by piecing the scope of hedonic and eudaimonic approaches together (Henderson and Knight, 2012). According to Seligman (2012), well-being is one of the significant topics in psychology that should be examined through understanding several different measures generating this topic. In addition, the main criterion for assessing well-being is flourishing and eventually the major purpose of positive psychology is to enhance flourishing.

In flourishing theory by Seligman (2012), the term is tentatively described as the elevated levels of subjective well-being. However, flourishing is also stated as a construct that has different measurable elements contributing to this construct rather than making definition of it. In other words, there is no one single measure to characterize flourishing but measurable elements come together to contribute to the existence of flourishing. The flourishing theory divides the construct in five distinctive elements that may be abbreviated as PERMA. Those elements of flourishing are; positive emotions or pleasant life, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. These elements of flourishing share three important features: a) they all promote well-being, b) most of the people accompany the specific element for its own sake not to reach to other elements, c) each element is identified and assessed independent of other ones.

## **2. Mindfulness and Flourishing**

Mindfulness can be broadly defined as maintaining a unique and conscious aliveness to the present reality (Hanh, 1991). This unique way of directing attention to the present moment includes specific characteristics such as intentionality and non-judgementality (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), acceptance toward inner experiences like cognitions, sensations, physical existence (Germer, 2005), metacognitive awareness and attention regulation during awareness (Bishop et al., 2004) that all form the authenticity of mindfulness process. According to some offenders, all of these specific features of mindful awareness facilitate well-being through building a connecting presence to the present experiences instead of holding a reactive and judgmental attitude toward these experiences (Germer, 2005).

Examination of theoretical approaches to mindfulness and also applied programs tentatively yields that both of the literature mainly highlights the counterproductive role of mindfulness in the presence of a problem or a specific mental health disorder. However, the recent inclination in mindfulness field clearly points to an authentic convergence of mindfulness to a positive psychological point of view (Niemic, Rashid and Spinella, 2012). Furthermore, such mindfulness oriented studies from the lenses of positive psychology wouldn't have ignored the integration of mindfulness and the potential therapeutic roles of this concept in flourishing that lies at the heart of positive psychology. In fact, this idea over the alliance of mindful

awareness to flourishing could also be underlined through direct or indirect connections of this specific way of awareness to flourishing by various studies (Coffey, Hartman and Fredrickson, 2010; Prazak et al, 2012).

### **2.1 The Mediating Role of Self-compassion**

As well as mindful awareness, self-compassion is also a frame of mind embedded in Buddhism teachings. According to Neff and Dahm (2015) compassion specifically means an open perception and standing to the suffering embedded in living. This specific way of inward compassion includes three main features: a sense of common humanity, mindfulness and kindness. Self-compassion is generally prominent in times of personal drawbacks, faults and challenging and harsh life experiences arising from uncontrolled external conditions. In the face of such harsh conditions, failures and incompetency feelings, getting a sincere and gentle view toward ourselves is the evident of having a compassionate attitude for the self. Otherwise, individuals assume on a critical manner directed toward their inner self by a strict and judgmental language (Germer and Neff, 2013).

Based on the implications of mindfulness theory toward self-compassion, it should be noted that such compassion is an essential therapeutic element of mindful awareness. As such, through the lenses of mindfulness practice, being compassionate is orienting the mind or responding capacity to accept the human suffering along with a mindfully aware manner as well as greeting all human experiences with empathy, tranquility and endurance. In addition to these theoretical overlaps, the connection between mindfulness and self-compassion is also evident through countless number of studies (Barnard and Cury; 2011; Bluth, Roberson and Gaylord, 2015; Germer and Neff, 2013; Neff, 2003; Woodruff, et al., 2013). As well, this unique view toward suffering and experiences accompanying mindful awareness should also be regarded as essential facilitator of well-being for various populations (Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Supportively, the compassionate view of the self holds a therapeutic promise for flourishing and related outcomes shown through different studies (Germer and Neff, 2013; Satici, Uysal and Akin, 2013; Sun, Chan and Chan, 2016; Verma and Tiwari, 2017).

### **2.2 The Mediating Role of Valued Living**

Similar to self-compassion, valued living was accepted as another individual factor operative in the relationship between mindfulness and flourishing in this study. Values and living consistent with values are crucial processes for healthy psychological status emphasized in various schools. Within the third generation behavior therapy framework, valued living was underlined as a core mechanism of adaptive psychological functioning. One of the elaborative definition and description of values and valued living can be found in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. According to ACT, values are verbally structured aspired life outcomes (Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson, 1999). More distinctly, values are verbally formed and independently selected results of dynamic, continuous patterns of events in that these values which are also intrinsic to

be active in the valued behaviors set the superior reinforcement for this event (Wilson and DuFrene, 2009, p. 66).

In mindfulness tradition, values become the destination of mindful awareness especially when “mind traps” inhibit individual potential to progress in their lives. Mindfulness extends individuals’ world and takes them to a more flexible realm along with more options in their lives (Wilson and Murrell, 2003). In addition, mindful awareness may reinforce and bring out behaviors that promote to take steps in a valued direction (Hayes, 2013). Turning back to the flourishing part, valued living is also expected to facilitate flourishing based on two theoretical standings: a) holding life goals and having value directions in the life is a therapeutic well-being factor by itself (Bobowik, Basabe, Pa’ez, Jimenez and Bilbao, 2010; Brown and Kasser, 2005; Sagiv and Schwartz, 2000) and b) consistency in living a value directed life along with the core values in the life inevitably brings out well-being and hence flourishing (Wilson and Murrell, 2003; Wilson, Sandoz and Kitchens, 2010).

Given all of these outlined alliances and pre-assumed theoretical connections, this study cultivates mindfulness and related therapeutic features of self-compassion and valued living as potential factors predicting flourishing through interacting with each other. More specifically, the aim of the current study is to test a mindfulness model of flourishing regarding the proposed mediating roles of self-compassion and valued living for this unique relationship.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Participants

327 university students (236 female, 91 male) formed the sample group of the study. The average age of the participants was 20.3 (SD=1.4). Convenience sampling was used to select the sample owing to the time/ cost advantages of this method for the researcher (Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun, 2011).

#### 3.2 Instruments

**PERMA- Profiler** (Butler and Kern, 2015) is a multi-dimensional scale measuring well-being through positive feelings, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment domains based on the well-being theory of Seligman. The instrument has 23 items along with 15 items measuring five dimensions of well-being and eight filler items. The internal consistency value of Cronbach alpha changes between .92 and .95 for the sub-dimensions. In the Turkish adaptation of Perma-Profiler, Cronbach alpha value was .91; while test-retest value was .83 for the overall scale (Demirci, Ekşi, Dinçer and Kardaş; 2017).

**Mindful Attention Awareness Scale-Adolescent version** (Brown, West, Loverich, and Biegel, 2011) is a 14 item scale measuring the major dimensions of mindful awareness in 14-18 aged adolescents. The scale is in a 6 point Likert type (1-almost always; 6-almost never) through the higher scores pointing out to the higher levels of mindful awareness. The Cronbach alpha value of the scale was .82 while test-retest value was .79 indicating

satisfactory evidence of reliability. The Turkish adaptation of MAAS-A supported the single factor of the scale ( $\chi^2 = 162.5$ ,  $df = 75$ ,  $\chi^2 / df = 2.17$ ;  $GFI = 0.94$ ,  $CFI = 0.92$ ;  $TLI = .90$ ;  $RMSEA = 0.06$ ) by also yielding the Cronbach alpha value as .81 (A-Sünbül, 2016).

**Self-Compassion Scale** (Neff, 2003) is 26-item measure assessing compassion through the following six dimensions: self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness and over-identification. The Cronbach alpha for the scale was .93 indicating a near perfect internal consistency. In the Turkish adaptation of SCS, the Cronbach alpha levels for the sub-scales were .77 for self-kindness, .77 for self-judgment, .72 for common humanity, .80 for isolation, .74 for mindfulness and .74 for over-identification (Akin, Akin and Abacı, 2007).

**Valued Living Questionnaire** (Wilson and Groom, 2012) measures the values in ten main life domains. In the first part of the scale, respondents answer the importance of each life domain from 1 (not all important) to 10 (extremely important). In the second part, the respondents rate the consistency of their actions with the specified value regarding the last week. Then, the scores obtained in two parts are summed to get a total score. The internal consistency indicator Cronbach alpha was .74 while test-retest value was .75 for the overall scale.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

In the first part of data analysis, the raw data was screened and cleaned through SPSS 20 statistical package program (IBM, 2011). Then, in order to test the model fit indicators as well as the standardized path coefficients of the proposed model, AMOS 18 program (Byrne, 2001) was used.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted in order to explore the correlations between the exogenous variable; mindfulness, endogenous; flourishing and mediator variables; valued living and self-compassion. The inter-correlations between the variables of the proposed model are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Inter-correlations between Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Mindfulness	-			
2. Self-compassion	.21***	-		
3. Valued living	.16**	.25***	-	
4. Flourishing	.16**	.45***	.51***	-

**Note:** N = 327; \*\*\*p < .001, \*\*p < .01, (2-tailed).

Based on Table 1, it can be argued that significant correlations exist between the variables of the proposed model. Namely, flourishing, the endogenous variable, is positively and significantly related to mindfulness ( $r = .16$ ,  $p < .01$ ), valued living ( $r = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and self-compassion ( $r = .45$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As well, the exogenous, mindfulness

has significant positive correlations with self-compassion ( $r = .21, p < .001$ ) and valued living ( $r = .16, p < .01$ ). Lastly, a positive significant correlation exists between the mediators of self-compassion and valued living ( $r = .25, p < .001$ ).

#### 4.2 Path Analysis

A path analysis was run so as to examine the proposed model. Regarding the satisfactory evidence for normality assumption, the Maximum Likelihood Estimation was conducted (Kline, 2011).

At the first step, the chi-square value ( $\chi^2$ ), normed chi-square index ( $\chi^2/df$ ), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) and goodness of fit index (GFI) were examined to get support over the goodness of fit of the proposed model. These values as shown up for the justified model as well as the criterion ranges for these indices are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Model Fit Indices for the Proposed Model and Criterion Values

Goodness of Fit Indexes	Model Fit Indices of the Proposed Model	Criterion Ranges
$\chi^2, df$	0.29; 1	Non-significant
$\chi^2/df$	0.29	$\chi^2/df < 3$
CFI	1.00	.90 < CFI
TLI	1.00	.90 < TLI
RMSEA	.00	RMSEA <.05
GFI	1.00	.90 < GFI

As presented in Table 2, all of the model fit indices emerged namely the chi-square value ( $\chi^2 (1) = .29, p = .54$ ), the normed chi-square value of 0.29, The RMSEA value of .00, the comparative fit index CFI, Tucker Lewis index (TLI) and goodness of fit (GFI) indexes of 1.00 point to a perfect fit of the data (Bentler; 1990; Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Kline, 2011; Schumacker and Lomax, 2004).

Secondly, the standardized path coefficients were found out and shown in Figure 1.

According to Kline (2011), standardized path coefficient value of  $< .10$  is accepted as a “small” effect; values adjacent to  $.30$  as a “medium” effect and values  $> .50$  have a “large” effect. Based on these criteria, mindfulness is seen to have medium effects on the mediators of self-compassion ( $\beta=.21$ ) and valued living ( $\beta=.11$ ). Similarly, the mediator self-compassion and ( $\beta=.34$ ) and valued living ( $\beta=.43$ ) came out to have medium direct effects on flourishing. All the proposed paths for the mindfulness model of flourishing emerged significant. In addition, the squared multiple correlation coefficient ( $R^2$ ) yielded that the model accounts for %37 variance in flourishing scores.

#### 4.3 Direct and Indirect Relationships

In the last step of path analysis, the standardized direct, indirect and total effects emerged in the model were checked and summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Standardized Direct, Indirect and Total Estimates of the Proposed Model

Paths	Standardized Estimates ( $\beta$ )
Mindfulness  Flourishing	
Indirect (Total)	.12**
Indirect by self-compassion	.07**
Indirect by valued living	.05**
Self-compassion  Flourishing	
Direct	.34**
Valued living  Flourishing	
Direct	.43**

**Note:** \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Based on the direct, indirect and total effects shown up in Table 3, it can be concluded that mindfulness has a significant indirect effect on flourishing ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ ) through both paths of self-compassion ( $\beta = .07$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and valued living ( $\beta = .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As well, the mediators self-compassion ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and valued living ( $\beta = .43$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were found to have significantly direct paths to flourishing.

## 5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the model fit and standardized coefficients of a mindfulness model of flourishing through the mediating influences of self-compassion and valued living. The model offered was tested by the indirect connections of mindfulness to flourishing along with the moderating paths of self-compassion and valued living in this connection. The emerged model fit indices showed that the model excellently corresponds with the data. As well, all of the path coefficient values exhibited significant relationships between the variables of the model.

As expected, the results of the study showed that the direct relation of mindfulness to self-compassion is positively significant. Derived from the Buddhist psychology, mindfulness and self-compassion are occasionally accepted as intersecting concepts to each other. According to Neff and Dahm (2015), self-compassion is getting awareness and distinctly approaching the painful experiences in the life. Such compassion involves a gentle and related view against the suffering in the experiences of the self and others. Within the mindfulness theory, self-compassion is accepted as an essential therapeutic dimension that should accompany to the mindful awareness. In this way, mindfulness literature highlights compassion as a *'direction of the mind'* and *'capability of responding'* in that mindful awareness is cultivated by negotiating the suffering as well as welcoming painful experiences in an calm, tolerant and balanced manner (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p.8). This specific relation with the inner self as well as a mindfully oriented attention to internal and external world creates a new outlook characterized as a peaceful pace in that unfavorable experiences are regarded as a more realistic realm and the restless mind turns into a more calm and open state

(Neff, 2012). This theoretical standing can also be utilized to explain the findings of this study that indicate an indirect relation between mindfulness of flourishing as well as the direct effects of self-compassion on flourishing as also arose in many other studies (Neff, Kirckpatrick and Rude, 2007; Leary, Tate, Allen, Adams and Hancock; 2007; Neff and McGeehee, 2010).

Given the direct effect between mindfulness and the mediator variable valued living as well as the direct effect of valued living on the endogenous variable, flourishing, both of the direct paths were found positively significant. Mindfulness literature clearly exhibits values and consistently living with these values as one of the behavioral outputs of mindful awareness and mindfulness practice (Wilson and Murrel, 2003). A clear mind purified from the traps of the mind is expected to initiate actions to figure out the core personal values as well as get by these values in the life. In addition, valued living brings out authenticity in one's life that also functions as a therapeutic strength of psychological health (Hayes, 2013). It is a clear fact that such a mindfulness oriented valued and authentic living is also a contributing factor of flourishing in the current study. Supported by many value oriented flourishing studies, both possessing certain values in the life and also stable behavioral manifestations corresponding with these values form two therapeutic functions leading to flourishing (Bobowik, Basabe, Pa'ez, Jime'nez and Bilbao, 2010; Brown and Kasser, 2005; Sagiv and Schwartz, 2000; Wilson and Murrel, 2003; Wilson, Sandoz and Kitchens, 2010).

The study has a number of inferences to be mentioned for further studies. First of all, this study was an attempt to examine the interactive effects of personal psychological attributes of mindfulness, self-compassion and valued living on flourishing. The results tentatively pointed out that mindfulness and related therapeutic factors proposed explain a certain variance in flourishing. Further studies interested in mindfulness models of flourishing can also be suggested to take other mindfulness derived attributes such as emotion regulation, cognitive flexibility and diffusion, acceptance into account while forming such models. In addition, this study focused on testing the mindful alliances for flourishing in a pre-assumed normative population. However, other researchers may also examine such complex models for the specific populations or age groups in the society. In addition to such implications drawn, the study should be critically regarded based on the limitations it has. One of the certain limitations of the study is the absent of randomization in sample selection process that may restrict the area of the influence for the results of the study. Secondly, the number of female participants in the current study (236 female) was visibly superior than male participants (91 male) that may also impair the generalizability for the findings of this work.

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